

[Daniel Barlow, VT Press Bureau](#)

Bob Nelson loves the old building he owns in the historic downtown of this central Vermont town.

But with old buildings come old problems: Drafty, single-paned windows, poor insulation and heat that exits the building seconds after it warms a room.

"You can see the heat escaping the building from the roof," said Nelson, the owner of Nelson Ace Hardware in Barre.

Nelson, whose building houses his storefront and eight upstairs apartments, has dreamed of retrofitting the structure to be more energy-efficient. But the up-front costs — which he estimates could be upwards of \$35,000 — are prohibitive for him.

"The windows are more than 80 years old," he said. "They have wood frames. They just don't keep in the heat like newer buildings do."

Vermont's U.S. Rep. Peter Welch made a trip through Nelson's building with him and an official from Efficiency Vermont Tuesday as the Democratic congressman highlighted a new legislative effort that he hopes — if it passes a difficult Congress — will make it easier for small-business owners to jump-start these renovations.

Welch calls the program Building Start (it's modeled after a similar program he sponsored, Home Start) and would supply extremely low-interest loans and rebates of up to 30 percent for building owners to make their properties energy-efficient.

"We have many old buildings in Vermont that have historic significance, but are not actually that

efficient when it comes to energy," Welch said during a telephone interview Tuesday afternoon. "What we want to do is make it easier for building owners to get these updates and the savings."

The U.S. House has passed legislation creating a Home Star program (the U.S. Senate has not yet taken up the issue) and Welch said he is optimistic there is bipartisan support for the Building Star program, which will apply to commercial buildings and multifamily homes.

He said the Building Star program is expected to create 150,000 construction and manufacturing jobs across the country and result in an estimated annual energy savings of \$3 billion. The reduction in carbon emissions would be the equivalent of removing 44 million cars from the roads.

Walter Scott, the senior project manager for Efficiency Vermont, said Building Start would go "above and beyond" programs available to business and building owners now. Vermont has lots of historic buildings similar to Nelson's in Barre, he said, and many of them are notorious energy wasters.

"Some of these buildings have been remodeled over the years, but lots of them just suck up the heat right into the attics and through the roofs," Scott said.

When organizations such as Efficiency Vermont do energy audits of these old buildings they itemize suggested changes based on how easily the reconstruction will be and how quickly the payback in energy savings would arrive.

"We give them a blueprint on how to make the building efficient," Scott explained. "They don't have to do it all at once."

Nelson said he wants to replace the windows on his old building and with more than 40 of them — each six feet by three feet — he estimates it may cost him \$25,000 for materials and another \$10,000 for installation.

"I'm spending between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year on heating costs alone," he said.

If Congress passes the Building Start bill, Nelson said he would be first in line to get a loan or apply for a refund to help him pay for the changes. As part of the proposal, Welch also hopes to require that all of the materials used are made in the United States.

"We'd see a lot of local jobs generated through this program," Welch said. "All this work would be done by Vermont contractors."